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ABSTRACT

Investigating the role and characterization of the American Indian as depicted in the Western comic book, a study was conducted wherein 44 comics containing at least two Indians were randomly selected from a list of 207 for analyzation. Utilizing three outside readers (a Canadian nurse, housewife, and Indian student), modified procedures of content analysis were employed to categorize and analyze pictorial and verbal data indicative of: physical appearance; dress and ornamentation; cultural materials; goals and values; and verbal symbols. Significant findings reflecting Indian stereotypes among the stories analyzed were: (1) grim facial expressions (100 percent); (2) Indians as naked above the waist, wearing loincloth, leggings, mocassins, and sandals; (3) dominance of the raiding, followed by the hunting economy; (4) violence initiated by Indians against non-Indians; (5) non-Indian protagonist/heroes (86.4 percent) vs Indian villains (77.3 percent); (6) personality traits of vengeance, hatred, and revenge; (7) goal attainment for both Indians and whites via physical violence; (8) 141 non-Indian generalizations about Indians vs 61 Indian generalized statements; (9) 268 examples of poor speech vs 10 non-Indian examples; (10) adjectives describing the Indian as aggressive, revengeful, cruel, treacherous, cowardly vs those describing the non-Indian as alert, persistent, individualistic, industrious, and shrewd. (JC)

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MONOGRAPH NO. THREE

THE ROLE OF THE INDIAN IN THE WESTERN COMIC BOOK

by

VICKI ANN GREEN

Synopsis of a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education in the College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, August, 1974.

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The purpose of this monograph is to share information and ideas associated with Indian and northern education.

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INTRODUCTION

Comic books are so well established that this fact alone justifies serious study of them, their function, and their potential influence in our society. Comics affect and reinforce cultural mores and popular expression.

The North American Indian, as a member of a minority group, is portrayed as a comic book character. The comic book is a media form produced by a culture that does not often allow the Indian a voice in his own portrayal. The western comic book depicts that aspect of the western myth "where the hero discovers that the legal and political structure is paralyzed and that he must resort to extra legal violence to bring about justice and restore the peace (Cawelti, 1964, p. 77)". It is contended that the western comic book serves as a vehicle to reinforce the dominant society's stereotype of the Indian. As we encounter items that our culture has defined for us we tend to perceive those items as a reinforcement to stereotypes and prejudices informally fixed in our minds.

A study by Agogino (1950) found the Indian subsisted in a hunting and raiding economy based on 19th century literature. Berelson (1946) found "that a prejudice toward minority groups was unintentional but consistent (p. 179)". Tucker (1970) found that children's attitudes toward Germany and Japan were significantly affected by comic book

heroes referring to "little yellow monkeys", "rice eating rats", and "brainless scum" (p. 10). Gast (1967) found virtually no negative stereotypes in children's literature, while studies of magazine fiction and text book studies found the opposite to be true. Malter (1952) found that "critics seldom refer to the western comic as this type of literature is closely associated with the development of the country and is generally considered acceptable (p. 508)". Apart from Hammersmith (1971), Agogino (1950) was the only study reviewed depicting, specifically, the Indian minority group in a media form.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

At a time when there is an increasing sensitivity to the plight of the Indian in the general society, it is of paramount importance that educators be cognizant of the Indian's portrayal in a media form available to children. A study was designed to investigate the role and characterization of the Indian depicted in the western comic book.

A total of 207 comics were collected. This was a working number too vast to be handled by this study so a list of random numbers was applied to reduce the collection to 50 comic books. As each comic contained an average of three stories, there remained 105 episodes. Additional criteria of two Indians, one with a major speaking part, was applied. This reduced the sample to a manageable working number of 44. These stories became the sample for this investigation.

The investigator employed three outside readers to analyze the comic books in terms of specified categories pertaining to Indians,

such as physical appearance, dress and ornamentation, cultural materials, goals and values, and verbal symbols.

Three members of a northern community, a n[illegible]e, a housewife, and an Indian student were asked to participate in the pilot study. All were familiar with the comic book as a media form. The coding system was explained to them and any questions were answered before the coding was undertaken. The overall average coder agreement was 90.8%.

The procedures of content analysis were employed to categorize and analyze pictorial and verbal data in the comic books. The guide lines of Berelson (1952) were used to develop the categories utilized and the procedures and categories applied to Agogino (1950), Katz and Braly (1933), and Spiegleman, et al. (1953) were modified to suit the purposes of this study.

FINDINGS

Findings indicated that the percentage of books (41.9%) depicted the Indian as natural in color, medium in height (79.5%) and build (95.5%). A most significant finding is the facial expression depicted. The Indian appeared as having a grim expression in 100% of the stories analyzed.

The Indian is presented as naked above the waist and as wearing loincloth and leggings, and mocassins or sandals in over 80% of the comics. Indians were depicted in full plains headgear in 47.7% of the comics. Every comic story contained more than one form of ornamentation, such as wrist bands, arm bands, necklaces, earrings, and shell or metal objects. War paint was noted in 47.7% of the comics.

Hair style was generally depicted in terms of a scalp lock (22.7%), shoulder length (31.5%), or braided down one side (60.0%).

The weapons most commonly used were the bow and arrow, tomahawk, and knife. All of these weapons are primitive. Guns only appeared in 59.1% of the comic stories.

Of the comics analyzed, 56.8% of the comics pictured the Indian living in a tipi. The raiding economy was most often depicted, followed by a hunting economy. The commonest means of transportation depicted was via the horse; less often Indians were shown as travelling on foot. Only 9.1% of the comics depicted a canoe of any sort.

There is no evidence of drunkenness - a commonly held stereotype of the Indian today. Dirtiness is often considered part of the Indian stereotype, but it did not appear as a characteristic in any of the stories analyzed. Evidence of bravery and of cruelty were apparent as dominant items analyzed in this category. Every act of violence was noted, the most common was shooting. The direction of the violence in 75% of the comic book stories was initiated by the Indian against the non-Indian. The cursory overall explicit theme, noted by the coders after the first reading of the comics was one of power and dominance. Clearly and most significantly, the direction of the stories was negative towards Indians.

The main character was non-Indian or white in 88.6% of the comic book stories analyzed. This is favorable to the non-Indian; the Indian only appeared in the role of main character in 11.4% of the comic stories. Three stories, or 6.8% of the stories, did not contain non-Indian characters. The Indian only appeared as the main character in

two comic stories, or 4.5% of the stories that contained non-Indian characters. The Indian occupied the role of sub-major character in 70.6% of the comics analyzed, compared to 30.0% by the non-Indian character. In 86.4% of the stories, the non-Indian emerged as the hero, as compared to 13.7% for the Indian. Also, the Indian appeared in the role of villain 77.3% of the time compared to 22.8% for the non-Indian.

The main personality traits which marked the Indian's actions were vengeance, hatred and revenge; for the non-Indian the main trait presented was the pursuit of justice.

The most dominant means used to attain goals for both the Indian and the non-Indian was physical violence or threats of physical violence. Deceit, cunning, and trickery was the second most dominant means of attainment of goals for both the Indian and the non-Indian characters analyzed.

The barriers to achievement of goals brought out the fact that in 31.9% of the stories analyzed, the Indian did not achieve his goal due to interpersonal violence. Also, in 22.8% of the stories he did not achieve his goals because of deceit, cunning or trickery on the part of others. In 67.0% of the stories the non-Indian did not experience any barriers to his goal achievement.

Non-Indians made 141 generalizations about Indians, whereas Indians utilized this technique of description in 61 instances. Some examples were: Indians will not fight at night, when they attack they scream and yell, they have outlived their time and are easily cheated

and fooled. They do not hurt feeble minded people and do not complain. Non-Indians cannot be trusted, are greedy and want to help Indians.

Non-Indians employed name calling 355 times compared to 112 times by the Indians. Non-Indians utilized stereotypes in 127 instances compared to 39 instances by Indians. Indians are cruel, superstitious, good hunters, thieves, ignorant, and cannot solve their own problems. Non-Indians are untrustworthy, greedy, talk too much, and like to take over. These are examples of stereotypes utilized by the Indian.

For the most part the Indian had poor speech patterns. In 268 instances words were left out of sentences spoken by Indian characters rather than 10 instances by the non-Indian. Indians expressed more guttural sounds than the non-Indian; 205 compared with 52.

The five most repetitive nouns used to identify the Indian in the 44 comic book stories were: Injun, Redskin, Brave, Warrior, and Squaw. The five most repetitive nouns used to identify the non-Indian characters were: Paleface, Whiteman, Yellowstrips, Boss, and Agent.

The five most repetitive adjectives used to describe the Indian were: aggressive, revengeful, cruel, treacherous, and cowardly. The five most repetitive adjectives used in describing the non-Indian were: persistent, alert, individualistic, industrious, and shrewd.

The five most repetitive violent verbs found in the comic books were: shoot, scalp, kill, attack, and revenge.

These lists of words serve to identify the violent or aggressive pulse of the western comic book.

Each coder was instructed to put down the implicit theme of the comic story and the dominant, implicit concept or lesson intended. This

was done at the completion of the story reading for the first time. In this way the investigator obtained 44 themes and lessons documented in a simple sentence from each of the four coders. Percentage coder agreement for the thematic and precept data was 80.7%.

The dominant implicit theme presented within the comic story was the dependence of the Indian on the non-Indian to solve his problems. A cursory examination of this dependency relationship revealed that the Indians' problems were either created by a "bad" Indian or non-Indian. Although the Indian group attempted to solve singular problems, the Indian solution was rarely considered the right one by the non-Indian as intervention was consistently prevalent in the stories analyzed.

The coder's interpretation of the overall theme, based on the explicit thematic category, was one of power and dominance. The most repetitive concept or lesson implied by the comic book stories was one upheld by the comic code: that in all cases, "good shall triumph over evil". It is pertinent to note that in 77.3% of the comics analyzed the Indian was depicted as evil while the non-Indian, who most often occupied the role of hero, was good.

CONCLUSION

The action in a comic book is compressed to provide the greatest stimulation effect. It is through this emotionalized interplay of words and pictures that the western comic book introduces, perpetuates, and reaffirms a negative representation of the Indian. The verbal-pictorial combinations in the comic books analyzed provide derogatory material so

that a non-reader or young child could form negative opinions toward the Indian.

Knowledge of stereotypes, generalizations, and derogatory words directed toward the Indian is invaluable to better understand the dominant non-Indian culture. Many changes have taken place in the last hundred years but the cultural changes affecting the Indian are not reflected in current comic book stories. The cultural implications of this assigned Indian role is a reinforced ignorance that condones and continues to perpetuate racial misunderstandings and mistrusts.

The western comic book stories analyzed act as a vehicle of introduction to, and reinforcement of operative non-Indian prejudices, stereotypes, and derogatory denorations toward the Indian minority group.

It is hoped that the content material pertaining to one minority group will be better understood and the cultural climate that condones such representation will be further realized. Too often the basis for North American, non-Indian heritage is founded on the "take over" or "settling" of the west illustrated in western comic book publications. The results are often non-Indian ignorance of the dimensions of past or present day Indian cultures.

It is hoped that one result of this study will be the inclusion of comic book material when a unit of study is presented on the Indian. A critical analysis could help offset the distorted and misinformed content presented therein. Also, at this time, balanced materials depicting the Indian of the 19th century could be compared to the comic book representation. A contrast could be made to present day materials available on the Indian in Canada today.

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